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ABSTRACT

Described is the federally funded Career Opportunities Program (COP), which trains paraprofessionals to provide special education services to handicapped children. Benefits of the program are said to include more individualized learning and improved student self concept as well as possible career employment for COP participants. Cited are programs in 12 U. S. cities. (CL)

COP Bulletin 7

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THE TRAINING AND UTILIZATION OF COP PARTICIPANTS IN EDUCATION OF THE HANDICAPPED

by

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THE TRAINING AND UTILIZATION OF COP PARTICIPANTS IN EDUCATION OF THE HANDICAPPED

Only in recent years has American society begun to face up to the educational needs of the handicapped. In 1971, the U.S. Office of Education estimated that at least 10 percent of the nation's school-age children were sufficiently handicapped to require special education services, but that of approximately 6 million handicapped children fewer than 3 million were receiving adequate services and many were receiving no services at all. Court decisions and the continuing pressure of parents and professional educators have led more and more states to mandate public education for the handicapped and local education agencies to provide increased special services and programs.

Federal agencies have also become increasingly active in protecting the educational rights of the handicapped. Edward W. Martin, Associate Commissioner of the Office of Education, Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (BEH), reported that federal spending to promote education of the handicapped rose from $45 million in 1967 to $215 million in 1972, and that over those years handicapped children were placed in special classes at a rate of 100,000 children per year. Sidney P. Marland, Jr., as Assistant Secretary for Education, called for the provision of "full educational opportunity for every handicapped child in this country by 1980," and BEH has developed a five-year (1974-78) plan toward attaining this objective.

Clearly, education of the handicapped is a growth area, and it can be expected that more resources, especially human resources, will be called for to achieve the goal of providing handicapped children the same educational opportunities that other children have.

This bulletin focuses on the involvement of COP participants in education of the handicapped. Traditionally, the role of the teacher aide in special education has been limited. In many cases, aides were parents or other community members who volunteered their services on a regular or irregular basis and whose functions included lunch and bus duty, clerical work, transporting children from room to room, assisting them in the lavatory, etc. For both volunteers and salaried aides (whose functions in the classroom were similar), little or no training was provided and little thought or planning was devoted to career development. Instructional activities were solely the responsibility of the special education teacher, consultant, speech/hearing therapist, etc. (usually with a master's degree and certification in special education). Given the limitations of time and human energy, she or he was often hard put to provide sufficient individualized planning and instruction, let alone use specially developed educational materials and audiovisual aids.

For the most part both teachers and aides have been women. Rather than being given credit for the more demanding job they have had to do, special education teachers and aides, with their handicapped students, have been until recently a voiceless and invisible minority. Add to this the fact that poor, Black, and other minority group children have often been misclassified as slow learners or mentally retarded on the basis of culturally biased testing devices, and relegated to special classes; it becomes clear that special education is an area fraught with complexities and one in which there is much room for improvement and change.

Across the United States, local education agencies in collaboration with COP projects have taken up this challenge and are addressing themselves to problems and issues in special education through school-based training of paraprofessionals, particularly in instructional activities; a higher education component focused on aides' career development and fulfillment of state requirements for special ed teaching certification; and joint teacher-teacher aide planning and delivery of special education services in the schools.

From the start, most COP aides involved in education of the handicapped have indicated a commitment to special education teaching and to qualifying themselves for state endorsement. Their prospects for employment and quality performance in special education teaching are excellent because of their unique on-the-job training and experience; many COP aides have been assured of teaching positions well before college graduation. A good number of those who have already graduated have been hired as special ed teachers in the school system where they worked as aides.

The special education services provided by COP aides are as varied as LEA arrangements for education of the handicapped, which range from instruction in self-contained classrooms to resource rooms, itinerant teachers, and most recently to "mainstreaming" or integrating handicapped students into regular classrooms rather than channeling them into separate programs. Many school systems use a combination of these approaches. The mainstreaming concept is premised on the notion that the special educational needs of handicapped children can be provided within the framework of the regular school program, with supportive services (including those of the consultant, resource teacher and specially trained paraprofessional) backing up the regular classroom teacher. It is felt by many that segregating handicapped students, especially those who are minimally handicapped, often does more harm than good by placing on them a permanent disability label (sometimes the result of faulty or inadequate assessment). According to Dr. Ernest Siegel, a leader in special education:

> Rather, the needed educational help should be recognized and a stimulating setting for individual growth and development be planned and fostered in the regular classroom so that the immersion of the handicapped in the total process of education will eventually fortify such persons for living in the normal world.[1]

Clearly, paraprofessionals can play a large and important role in working in collaboration with special ed and regular teachers and consultants toward meeting the educational needs of the blind, deaf, emotionally disturbed, mentally retarded, orthopedically handicapped, speech impaired, and learning disabled, more and more of whom are demanding and getting public education. Some of the outstanding ways in which COP participants currently serve in the education of the handicapped are described below.

GENTRY, ARKANSAS

Gentry COP serves a consortium of Gentry, Fayetteville, and Prairie Grove schools. There are about 20 COP aides who work in special education classes; about 15 of these are in elementary schools (which group handicapped students on three levels depending on chronological age and degree of need). Almost all the students served by the self-contained special ed classes are mentally retarded.

Partly because there is a shortage of certified physical education teachers, and partly because it is valuable experience, COP aides conduct physical ed classes daily for handicapped students. They are also joined by teachers and community volunteers (some of whom are parents) in supervising weekly swimming sessions for handicapped students at a local youth center.

COP aides participate in planning sessions with special ed teachers and consultants; there are also joint teacher-teacher aide workshops and a school-based training session for aides during the last weeks of August before school starts.

One COP aide who recently graduated is now a special ed teacher in the Fayetteville schools.

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[1]Ernest Siegel, Special Education in the Regular Classroom (New York: John Day, 1969), p. ix.

WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

Worcester has about 12 COP aides in special education; all of these are in elementary schools. Most of the students they work with are mentally retarded and are in self-contained classrooms for part of the day; here the aides provide individualized instruction under the supervision of special ed and resource teachers. The teacher and teacher aides plan lessons jointly, and the aides supervise the children in outdoor activities.

For the remainder of the day, handicapped students are mainstreamed. At present, the paraprofessionals in the regular classes in which the handicapped are mainstreamed do not have any specialized training in education of the handicapped; however, the Worcester schools have received two grants under ESEA Title VI which will enable them to provide school-based training. When this is implemented, COP aides in special ed classes and those who work with handicapped students in regular classes will receive specialized training from special ed teachers and consultants.

COP aides working with the handicapped specifically requested such placement; most of them are majoring in special ed at the University of Massachusetts and will receive state certification upon graduation. One COP graduate is now teaching special ed.

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

One of Kansas City's aims is to provide its eight COP participants in special education with varied experiences in working with children who have different types of handicaps. Thus, COP aides (who by regulation are not allowed to teach in special ed until their senior year in college, by which time they have taken sequences in education of the mentally retarded, learning disabled, and emotionally disturbed) are not assigned permanently to special ed classes, but, rather, spend portions of the school semester in different special ed settings in grades K through 12.

School-based training is also provided to special ed teams including teachers and teacher aides.

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

Of 10 Minneapolis COP teacher aides in special education, two who have recently graduated are now certified special ed classroom teachers and one is a resource teacher. The remaining aides serve in various capacities and different learning situations. These include: self-contained classes for SLBP (special learning and behavioral problems) students; an SLBP resource center, where a COP aide works with individual students who leave their regular classrooms for 15- and 20-minute instructional sessions; an early education program for the hearing impaired -- an integrated program for prekindergarten children in which the hearing impaired receive separate instruction in the morning and join regular classes in the afternoon. The aides work with individual students and small groups, assist students in playyard activities, bus transportation, etc.

COP aides meet with special ed teachers and resource teachers for school-based training, and also take skills classes and discuss career plans with the Minneapolis schools Career Development Section. Often supervisors and cooperating teachers invite COP aides to area staff meetings in special ed. One COP aide who works with the hearing impaired received special training in sign language which was paid for by the LEA.

Minneapolis also has an unusual program in which 30 COP aides are working and receiving intensive training in school social work. Part of their training involves working with students whose handicaps range from mental retardation to physical disabilities to emotional disturbances. The aides also meet with these students' families and consult with their teachers. A number of the aides are involved in the Student Support Program (SSP) under ESEA Title VIII. Through this program each aide provides social services to a caseload of 10 students and their families under the supervision of school social workers. SSP has its own training program; sessions have focused on the helping role, and during one winter break aides participated in a transactional analysis group. The higher education component of these social work aides includes sequences in social welfare and the human services at the participating IHE. The aides have been particularly effective with minority group students and their families.

NEWARK, NEW JERSEY

In Newark, seven COP aides assist in elementary level, self-contained special ed classes for the partially sighted, emotionally disturbed, physically handicapped, and mentally retarded. One aide has already graduated and is working as a special ed teacher.

Newark is outstanding in that all its COP aides have four-year on-the-job training for which they receive college credit (the number of credits varies depending on which participating IHE an aide attends). All COP aides in special ed take college courses in the field and will receive certification when they graduate.

The aides participate in workshops on methods, etc., along with cooperating teachers. In addition, there is a basic skills program in which COP aides spend two hours per week improving their math and English composition skills. This is provided by the LEA, and COP participants attend these sessions without compensation or release time. Dr. Ruth Kabot, of Newark's Career Development Institute, has said that she and others throughout the Newark schools are "extremely pleased" with the COP aides' performance in special ed classes.

TRENTON, NEW JERSEY

Trenton COP has more than 10 aides working and training in education of the trainable and educable mentally retarded, the learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, and speech impaired. One aide has already graduated and is a special education teacher. Several aides have been given long-term assignments in self-contained special ed classes and are majoring or minoring in the field at the participating IHE. Others are assigned to special ed classes but receive training only from their supervising teachers and take general elementary ed courses at the university. Still others are not permanently assigned to a special ed class but work in regular classes and are given shorter-term work and training in special ed classes. In a number of schools where handicapped children are in regular classes (in some cases awaiting placement in special classes), COP aides learn from regular elementary ed teachers who have some training in the education of the handicapped. The aides work with handicapped students in small groups both in the classroom and outside of it.

WINSTON-SALEM, NORTH CAROLINA

Six COP aides work in kindergarten through sixth grade in self-contained classes for the trainable and educable mentally retarded. Their main function in the classroom is instructional.

The aides take courses in elementary and special education at the participating IHE, Winston-Salem State University; however, the university does not offer a major in special ed. In order to provide a route whereby the aides may qualify for state certification, the city school system makes available to aides courses leading to the fulfillment of special ed requirements. Professors in special ed from a number of colleges and universities including University of North Carolina, Appalachian and Western Carolina colleges travel to Winston-Salem specifically for the purpose of teaching and training COP aides. Such courses meet twice weekly and the LEA pays the aides' tuition. In addition, aides participate in school-based training sessions during the summer and Staff Development Days which are held several times during the school year.

COP Director Edna Revels thinks that because of their excellent training and performance in the classroom, COP aides in special ed will be highly desirable applicants for teaching positions once they have graduated.

PORTLAND, OREGON

Three of Portland's 43 COP aides are currently working in special education programs. One is a Vietnam-era veteran who is preparing for state certification. Another aide also working toward certification is the parent of an auditorially handicapped child; she was originally a volunteer worker, became involved in COP several years ago, and is now an aide in classes for the deaf. The third aide is assigned to a special education center.

Portland uses both self-contained classes for the handicapped and mainstreaming. In classes where handicapped students are mainstreamed, the regular teacher has had some special ed training and is a close-at-hand model for the aide. In self-contained rooms, teacher and aide plan lessons jointly, and the aide assists in both small and large group activities.

COP Director Bobbie Nunn reports that aides with several years experience in special ed classes have excelled in their work and are assured of teaching positions upon graduation from Portland State University.

SCRANTON, PENNSYLVANIA

Scranton COP presently has about 21 aides working in more than three special education centers on the elementary level. They work under the supervision of, and often in team teaching situations with, special ed teachers in both self-contained and open classrooms for the most part with students who are severely mentally or physically handicapped. The Pennsylvania State Education Department has been recommending that handicapped students be mainstreamed in regular classes, and while this has not yet been implemented in schools in which COP aides work, it is being considered for the future.

Scranton has mandated that all the aides attend monthly in-service training sessions for special ed teachers. Most of the aides are majoring in education of the handicapped at Marywood College, which is noted for having an outstanding program, and will be receiving certification upon graduating.

Most of the nine COP graduates are presently teaching in special ed programs, and one aide who is a Vietnam-era veteran is planning to pursue a career in rehabilitation.

WATERBURY, VERMONT

Waterbury Elementary School employs one COP aide full-time in working with children who have learning and perceptual disabilities. Her name is Ms. Marion Malone and she is also earning her B.A. in elementary ed at the University of Vermont. She works with the learning disabled individually and in small groups in a special resource room. Previously, children with learning disabilities were grouped together and spent half a day in remedial work; now they are removed from regular classes for shorter periods of time. Ms. Malone, who has two years experience as a COP aide in regular classes, uses behavior modification techniques and reading remediation, and sees about six or seven children each day; she also does some clerical work. Her supervising teacher, Mr. Charles Jarvis, a special ed resource teacher, provides valuable school-based training.

MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

Thirty-two of Memphis' 110 COP aides are involved in education of the handicapped. Two of the aides have children who are handicapped, and one aide is herself handicapped; she has assisted in classes for the physically handicapped.

In Memphis schools, children with learning disabilities attend regular classes but spend several hours in resource rooms where special ed teachers and COP aides use a team teaching approach. Together teacher and aide prepare individualized plans for instruction, and these plans along with methods for their implementation are shared with the teacher in the classroom where the learning disabled child spends the greater part of his/her school day. COP participants working in resource rooms are those with senior status. They provide individualized instruction under the supervision of the special ed teacher.

Other COP aides are assigned full-time to self-contained classrooms for the trainable and educable mentally retarded, and still others work in regular classes in which students with learning disabilities are mainstreamed.

Acting COP Director Mary Robertson stresses the commitment of the COP aides, most of whom specifically requested that they be assigned to the special education program. Their commitment is further evidenced by the fact that requirements for special ed certification (toward which many are working) are more rigorous than those in elementary education. For example, they must earn student teaching credits in both elementary and special ed. In addition, in order to fulfill the student teaching requirement in special ed, COP participants must student teach in a different class, with a different supervising teacher, from the one in which they work as an aide. The purpose of this is to enable the supervising teacher to evaluate the aide as a teacher, not as an aide -- despite the fact that much of the aides' work is at the level of assistant teacher and includes instructional responsibilities.

COP and the school system are also encouraging the special ed aides who are not majoring in special ed to qualify themselves for state endorsement by taking the necessary university courses. The reason for this is that COP aides' performance in special education has gained them high esteem; it is felt that they will make excellent teachers in the field. Moreover, employment prospectives are considered to be better in special ed since the state education department is becoming more aware of the educational rights and needs of the handicapped, is urging local education agencies to take action to meet these needs, and is committing more funds for this purpose.

The Memphis schools have held on-site training classes for COP participants in special ed. Last year two courses were given in the fall and one in the spring. Also involved in school-based training is a professor in special education from Memphis State, the participating IHE. It is noteworthy that this professor is also a member of the COP advisory council.

Because of the very favorable response of teacher and administrators to the COP aides' performance in education of the handicapped, workshops and credit courses for non-COP paraprofessionals have been instituted following the COP model.

HILLSVILLE, VIRGINIA

Through the Hillsville COP project one aide works full-time in a TMR class, and four aides work part-time in EMR classes for children six to 13 years old. The TMR class is a self-contained unit with 10 students. The aide has teaching functions similar to the teacher. Students in the EMR classes remain grouped together for instruction in basic skills but participate in physical education, music, and art classes with children who are not handicapped. In basic skills classes the aide usually works in a tutorial with one or two students while the teacher instructs the larger group.

Valuable school-based training is provided through summer programs. Several summers ago the aides earned six college credits by participating in a practicum experience with handicapped students and special ed teachers. The next summer the training program was continued with aides and teachers participating.

One outstanding COP aide, Ms. Sue Moser, was invited to attend a regional workshop on curriculum development; the other participants were all special education teachers with master's degrees.

CONCLUSION

Despite teacher surpluses in other areas, there remains a great need for special education teachers. The demand for well-trained teachers promises to increase as greater numbers of handicapped children enter the public schools and as federal agencies, state education departments, and local education agencies commit more funds and implement plans to improve the quality of education for the handicapped. The trend toward mainstreaming which is gaining widespread acceptance throughout the country will create an even greater need for teachers and paraprofessionals who have specialized training in working with handicapped children. COP is instrumental in this regard in that it provides a model for the training and recruitment of greater numbers of well-qualified teachers of the handicapped.

The impacts of COP participants' involvement in special education, and of the new kinds of programs and methods (both for teacher training and children's learning) which have evolved as a result of their participation, are only beginning to be felt. What is evident right now is that COP sites demonstrate many alternative modes and institutional arrangements that lead to the goal of improving handicapped children's learning. The COP model provides the school conditions for more individualized learning, fewer behavior and discipline problems, and, importantly, improvement in students' self-image. In schools employing COP aides more thought is being given to implement new and more effective ways of training and utilizing personnel (both professional and paraprofessional). In institutions of higher education more experientially-oriented teacher training programs are being devised and tested. The most immediate gains are those of the COP participants in programs for the handicapped such as those described above, which may be gauged in terms of their education, employment, and new careers.

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